

Secretary Muskie

Refugees: The U.S. Response

December 5, 1980



United States Department of State
Bureau of Public Affairs
Washington, D.C.

U. S. DEPOSITORY DOCUMENT
DEC 01 1981
CONNECTICUT COLLEGE LIBRARY
NEW LONDON, CT 06320

Following is an address by Secretary of State Edmund S. Muskie before a conference on world hunger and refugees at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, December 5, 1980.

I'm grateful to Larry Berg and to the Institute of Politics and Government for inviting me to this conference and for drawing attention to the related problems of refugees and hunger in the world. And I want to express gratitude also to this audience, so many of whom have been in the forefront of efforts to help refugees here in California.

America's history and its resources—what we are and what we have—make it impossible for us to ignore these issues. Indeed, our historic values and our unmatched wealth compel us not just to play a role but to play a role of leadership in dealing with them.

Today I want to focus upon the subject of refugees: on the moral and practical issues that come to us in the human shape of up to 15 million refugees and displaced persons worldwide. I want to sketch for you the dimensions of the refugee problem as it confronts the United States and the world community. And I want to discuss what will be required of us—here at home and in our efforts abroad—if we are to deal responsibly with this issue.

If my remarks have any central point, it is this: that the United States and the world community must deal not only with the pressing outward manifestations of the refugee problem but with its underlying causes—war, political persecution, and other oppressions of the human person.

Dimensions of the Problem

One picture, as the old saying puts it, is worth a thousand words. And surely this is true when we see the photographs of suffering among the world's refugees. A year ago our hearts—and our consciences—were touched by the picture of a Kampuchean refugee mother holding her dead child. Two weeks ago, newspapers carried a picture of a refugee woman in Somalia, crouching with her nearly naked child in a flimsy hut made of sticks and rags.

In recent years, such tragic scenes have become all too frequent as millions have been driven from their homes by wars, civil disturbances, religious or racial persecution, or repressive government policies.

- In West Asia and Southeast Asia there are 4-5 million refugees and displaced persons, including those driven to flight and near-starvation by Vietnam's drive against Laos and Kampuchea. In the past year alone, more than a million Afghans have become refugees, victims of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

- About 4 million Africans have fled their homes; there are 3 million refugees as displaced persons in the Middle East; tens of thousands of people flee Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union each year.

- In our own hemisphere, there are now hundreds of thousands of refugees—not to mention the 136,000 Cuban and Haitian entrants who have come to the United States over the past 7 months.

These figures represent a sharp upsurge in the numbers of refugees worldwide. Since last January, hundreds of

thousands of men, women, and children have fled their homelands. This alarming situation is graphically illustrated by recent increases in the budget for the U.N. High Commissioner for refugees. Last year, the UNHCR spent \$234 million for refugee relief. This year, the figure will more than double, to \$568 million. And in spite of this dramatic increase, the need far outstrips the resources available for helping refugees.

U.S. Position

Where does the United States stand in its efforts to deal with the problem?

Generally, we can be proud of our response. In the fiscal year that ended last September 30, the United States provided more than \$650 million for international refugee relief and resettlement programs. This includes our donations to international organizations, Food for Peace help to refugees, transportation for refugees to the United States, and placement aid to voluntary agencies here at home. We admitted well over 200,000 refugees for resettlement in the United States. We received, in addition, 125,000 Cubans and 11,000 Haitians who have sought asylum in the United States but have not been granted refugee status.

Here at home, the Department of Health and Human Services provided more than \$600 million for refugee assistance in FY 1980. And the generosity of private citizens through churches and other groups is beyond all counting.

This generous response by the Federal Government, by the States, by churches, voluntary organizations, and individuals suggests to me that the people of the United States remain true to their traditions of concern for human rights and generosity to people in need. We can be proud also that the Congress has responded to the world refugee crisis by passing an enlightened law—the Refugee Act of 1980. This act has several important, even historic, provisions.

- It creates a uniform standard for defining refugees.

- It sets at 50,000 yearly the “normal flow” of refugees and enables the President, in consultation with Congress, to adjust that number if refugee emergencies require.

- It defines a fairer, more comprehensive system of Federal assistance for refugee resettlement within the United States. This is aimed at helping refugees become—as soon as possible—self-sufficient, contributing members of our society.

Having said all this, however, let me hasten to add: We are a long way from solving all the Domestic problems that ensue from the world refugee crisis and the heavy flow of refugees to the United States. For the moment, let me touch on some of the issues we face. They are acute now; they will pose enormous challenges to those in the future who seek to deal with refugee issues.

Issues to be Faced

The first problem is the problem of growing impatience, weariness, and even resentment felt by our people about the burdens created by the acceptance of refugees and emergency entrants. It will do no good to deny or minimize this reality.

To begin with, some citizens question whether we can afford to spend so much on refugees while other pressing problems demand immediate attention and resources. The practical burdens of helping refugees establish new lives in the United States are, as you know, enormous. The sheer numbers of recent years and the unpredictability of recent refugee waves have made careful planning difficult. They have given our national refugee programs an air of permanent emergency. The arrival of unorganized boat flotillas from Cuba over a short span of weeks last spring made it necessary, for example, to press widely scattered military facilities into sudden service as receiving centers.

Our social service programs—national, State, and local—have been hard pressed by this sudden surge of refugees. The State and local social-service machinery of Florida has been severely tested by the influx of Cuban and Haitian entrants—just as California has extended itself to accommodate the influx of Indo-chinese refugees.

You who have served in refugee sponsorship programs know the challenge of finding jobs in stressful economic times for refugees who may not speak English; whose skills may not be readily transferable to our job market; who may have trouble finding adequate housing when such housing for the disadvantaged is already scarce. Perhaps because of such problems, public opinion is not always receptive to large waves of refugees and immigrants. How shall we deal with this problem?

To begin with, I would suggest that we put it in proper perspective. The United States—by virtue of its size, its wealth, and its humanitarian traditions—is, to be sure, the largest contributor to international refugee relief. We have received, in absolute figures, the largest number of refugees in recent years.

But our contributions, I would suggest, are by no means disproportionate to our capacity. Our contribution to international refugee relief agencies last year, for example, amounted to nearly \$166 million—an impressive sum. But at 74¢ per American citizen, our contribution ranks not first but seventh in the world. Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and West Germany all contributed more based on their populations than we. And some other countries have resettled more refugees, as a proportion of their total populations, than we have.

Beyond reminding ourselves of these important facts, it is essential that the Federal Government generously cushion the impact of refugee resettlement on State and local budgets. To slash budgets in this area would not only press States and localities toward—or beyond—their fiscal limits, it would create new hardships for refugees and for our citizens, and it would aggravate the danger of social tension between refugees and host communities. That is a danger we can—and should—avoid.

Second, how shall we cope with sudden influxes like that from Cuba last spring? To argue that we should be open and generous is not to say that the United States can accept—or should accept—unlimited numbers of entrants or bear unlimited burdens.

The arrival last spring of thousands of Cubans in hastily organized boat flotillas casts this question and others into bold relief: What limits should we set, and how? What shall we do about the related problem of massive unlawful entry into the United States? How can we assure that our refugee and immigration policies are free of the taint of racial bias?

A national commission on immigration and refugee policy, chaired by Father Theodore Hesburgh of Notre Dame University, is pondering these questions now. But these questions should also be the focus of a careful national debate.

Third, what shall we do about the growing problem of “economic refugees?” Our law, and the U.N. convention on refugees, define refugees as those fleeing

political persecution, not poverty. But sometimes the line between the two is not so clear—as the plight of several thousand Haitians seeking asylum in the United States makes clear. Hunger, too, creates refugees. What should be our policy regarding those who flee both authoritarian rule and harsh, unrelenting economic deprivation? There is no easy answer to this question. But every boatload of hungry, miserable people sailing the Caribbean toward our shores suggests to me that we must find an answer that is both humane and practical.

The problems I have discussed are problems we Americans feel because of our own experiences with refugees here at home. We Americans must work together to solve them. But we must never forget—and other countries should remember—that what America does takes place in a broader context. The refugee issue is a global issue; it requires a global response.

So let me turn now to the international dimension of the problem. What should the international community do to help solve these pressing problems?

International Dimensions

To begin with, all nations must respond generously to help suffering people in camps and holding centers around the world. The funds must be provided. When necessary, all countries should be prepared to offer first-asylum—and many to provide permanent resettlement. This is an international obligation to be shared by all.

Furthermore, there must be an effort to establish clear, internationally acceptable principles governing the status and welfare of refugees, as well as the obligations of nations toward refugees. The U.N. General Assembly is now considering several proposals to define such principles. We believe that any such international agreement must include certain points.

- Large-scale expulsions of persons should be discouraged in the name of humanity and international order. I can imagine no justification—political, social, racial, or religious—for a government to force large numbers of its citizens to flee their homeland. Such expulsions are hostile acts directed by sending countries toward receiving ones and, thus, are doubly unacceptable.

- Persons displaced from their homelands should be allowed to return home voluntarily as promptly as conditions permit. The repatriation of persons following the end of the fighting in Zimbabwe and Nicaragua demonstrates that there are effective and humane ways to repatriate refugees.

- Nations guilty of mass expulsions must be obliged to repatriate immediately all criminals they have forced abroad, subject, of course, to the protection of rights extended to all displaced persons. We can no longer tolerate any country's attempt to rid itself of its criminal elements by cynically exporting them to neighboring nations.

- Our efforts must be focused on the fundamental human issues involved—on the human rights of refugees. Such an emphasis should cover not only the rights of refugees once they have left their native lands but also the obligations of the governments of the nations they are leaving—obligations to protect would-be refugees pending their departure, rather than to harass them as now often occurs.

Even if the community of nations can agree on programs based on these principles, other questions will remain.

Can we, without scaling down our other relief programs, increase international aid to African refugees? A relatively small fraction of the refugee relief budget has gone to Africa—even though

refugees in Africa constitute almost one-quarter of the world total.

And can we improve conditions for refugees worldwide, without creating a “pull” which actually induces people to leave their homelands?

If by raising such questions I seem to imply that the challenge is staggering, I make no apology: It is. But the challenge posed by the global tidal wave of refugees is one we cannot—must not—duck. The response of the United States to refugee problems must go beyond refugee relief. It must include strong support for human rights. It must include generous programs for foreign assistance—to eliminate some of the hunger, disease, and misery that create refugees.

Ultimately, we and the world can deal with the human tragedy of refugee migrations only by working to remove their root causes—by overcoming poverty, by working to alleviate hunger, by ending abuses of human rights within nations, by opposing military aggression, and by encouraging peaceful settlements of conflicts around the world.

We are, of course, unlikely to solve these problems in a short time. We are a long way from having a world that is so just, so humane, so prosperous and stable that no person is forced to flee from home and country. But surely the effort to build such a world deserves the work of all people who cherish human dignity and the sanctity of human life. And while we seek to build such a world, let us take every practical step we can to alleviate human suffering—wherever we find it. ■

Published by the United States Department of State • Bureau of Public Affairs • Office of Public Communication • Editorial Division • Washington, D.C. • December 1980 • Editor: Norman Howard • This material is in the public domain and may be reproduced without permission; citation of this source would be appreciated.

Bureau of Public Affairs
United States Department of State
Washington, D.C. 20520

Official Business

If address is incorrect
please indicate change.
Do not cover or destroy
this address label. ➡

Postage and Fees Paid
Department of State
STA-501

